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Knowing Your Place: The Impact of Public Sphere Rhetoric on Face-to-Face
Communities, and the Rhetorics that Support Racial Equality

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Introduction

Nothing is new about bias in the news media. This study begins with a look at the various realities created by some of the main outlets, the rhetorics they use and the rhetorics that result from their coverage of the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. In studying the germinal patterns of the national coverage, certain rhetorics surface. In the first chapter I consider the reactions to these cases from different points on the ideological spectrum and how those reactions are shaped by our “imagined communities” as defined by Benedict Anderson; our public sphere, as defined by Jurgen Habermas and reshaped by Nancy Fraser; and power, as conceived by Michel Foucault. I then discuss the advantages and necessity of ensuring a cultural diffusion of power at every level of authority and throughout the public sphere. In the second chapter, I examine the victimhood and vilification wielded by conservatives on one end and the group Black Lives Matter on the other, and the impact of that divisive rhetoric on a face-to-face community. The last chapter takes a long view of our national journey toward racial equality and the role of the jeremiad, as a type of speech that has prompted Americans to change their behavior, and the requisite conditions for people to construct healthier, more heterogeneous group identities. Each chapter looks at different versions of common good, and the obstacles citizens face in terms of seeing and including themselves within the common good. Altogether, it is a brief examination of the current contributing factors to our imagined communities, how imagined communities are used to maintain friction among groups and people, and ways we might revise the constitution of our imagined communities, so that in our daily lives we can operate with more humanity.

In many ways, working on this project has been like trying to paint a landscape while looking out the window of a Greyhound. The view keeps changing as more people weigh in. I have tried to cap the number of primary texts I've involved, but if someone should read this years from now, I want them to have a sense of the scale and the wall-to-wall coverage these cases seemed to receive. To render the way Americans were inundated with this coverage, I took care to be specific about dates and pull from a variety of publications to show that the stories of Martin and Brown were covered and commented on by all kinds of outlets. Still, the situation continues to evolve as police departments adjust their policies, more cases of racial injustice arise, and responses to these cases reverberate.

Working in a regional charter school that enjoys a very heterogeneous student body, I have adapted my teaching and my content each year to suit students, and to be sure to challenge and involve them all. These changes have brought new understandings to me, and at least part of my motivation for this project was to explore the changes I've felt happening within me. Further, I watched my students grieve case after case of police officers using deadly force on unarmed black men, women and teens. They processed these tragedies through their reader responses, their researched arguments for which they could choose their topics, their informal dialogue among friends, and more formal protests that they organized. In a different capacity altogether, I watched my father, a retired police officer, react with what can be called grief but I thought it necessarily different from that of my students at first. After some time, I saw a resemblance between them—both shattered in a way, feeling that no amount of explaining would convey the

injury done to them through these acts committed over and over again, just in different places with different people involved.

At some point early in Fall 2014, I overheard a student saying “It’s just like Mike Brown. You only believe her ‘cause she’s a white teacher!” And in the same day I heard a teacher remark, “he’s *such* a victim, of course.” These are comments made by teachers and students who have close personal friends of different races and cultures, so it occurred to me that they may not be saying these things if not for the recent flood of coverage about these types of cases. My initial idea was to focus on the toxic effects of this rhetoric, and I did, except I was mildly (and pleasantly) surprised by the results of an anonymous survey through which I sought to learn about tenth and eleventh grade students’ understanding of political bias in media, their views on these cases, and how these cases impacted their view of their community, and their level of optimism regarding the realization of racial equality. So I changed direction to discuss the idea of community-level change rather than federal legislation. It was a new path for me, as I typically am of the opinion that communities and individuals cannot be trusted to make decisions that benefit *all* people, but that is exactly where I came out in this project.

In writing this thesis, I made an effort to focus on the rhetoric of particular established groups; however, I also use the word “conservative” throughout. “Conservative” is a slippery word at best, embracing many-layered meanings, so it serves to clarify my meaning at the outset. In this paper, I use “conservative” to talk about media publications and personalities who appeal to white people who feel disenfranchised because of the multi-cultural emphasis in the media and in academia. They feel the

interests of others have been exacted at their expense. In other words, they feel like victims.

As it stands, I argue that the public sphere must represent a true variety of cultural backgrounds. Without that simple requirement, our very news will continue to be a symbol of the dominant culture. I argue that the polarized rhetoric is useful in making interest groups necessary, but the rhetoric that is characteristic of the groups involved in the issue of violence against unarmed blacks make it nearly impossible to move toward a solution. Finally, I argue that national “conversation” about race is counter-productive. A refocusing on our own community life will help more than addresses to national audiences, and this refocusing will encourage a more real version of the imagined community, one where we can include a heterogeneous assortment rather than a mythologized, sterile, homogenous community of our imagination.

Chapter 1

Truth, Power, and Hegemony in the Public Sphere: How the Coverage of the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown Shootings has Marked Progress in the Newsroom yet a Cultural Standstill

Progress, seemingly an objective word to describe forward motion, is a word that can cause some problems. As a society moves toward one way of thinking, it undoubtedly moves away from another. Just as motion in the earth's crust causes tensions and ruptures, progress in society produces similar fault lines. 2012 was a landmark year for race relations in the U.S. In February, Trayvon Martin, a Florida teen, was fatally shot while returning to his father's fiancé's condo in one of Sanford's gated communities. Then, nearly a month after the shooting, the national media coverage of Martin's death began, followed by months of polarizing commentary from pundits and public figures alike. After a month of national coverage, George Zimmerman, the man who shot Trayvon Martin, was charged with Martin's murder. In July of 2013, a jury found Zimmerman not guilty of all charges. In the interim, despite a tumultuous first term as President which left him vulnerable, the American voters reelected President Obama, whose presidency is often perceived to be a milestone in terms of the progress made in race relations in the U.S. Since Trayvon Martin's death, the national media has followed several similar cases, but the one that has received a great deal of attention was the August 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown during an encounter with police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. These cases are importantly different: Zimmerman, while licensed to carry a gun was not a law enforcement officer. Brown, also unarmed, had been an actual suspect in a convenience store theft. What is most

similar about these cases is the attention they received and the divisiveness of the coverage. The coverage of the Martin case in many ways set a template for subsequent similar cases. This template emphasizes the asymmetry of the power dynamics in these encounters, and it results in a cacophony of various publics, each with their own sense of community and reality rather than a sound discussion of public interest and safety. By looking at the national coverage of Trayvon Martin's death and juxtaposing it to the similar but less publicized case of Jonathan Ferrell's death, it becomes clear that a cultural diffusion of power at every level of the public sphere and what Foucault calls "the regime of truth" will help to create a more inclusive public sphere that constructs and shares a more complete truth.

The public sphere, first conceptualized by Jurgen Habermas, denotes a common space where members of a society can discuss issues of the day as peers. Habermas stipulates that there is only one public, and that this public sphere deals with overtly public (as opposed to private) matters. It is also distinct from the state. Habermas' description conjures an image of an open town meeting, where residents determine the agenda, and discuss multiple solutions and arrive at a consensus. Today, for better or worse, cable news constitutes our "public sphere." This venue is the place where opinions about national news and spectacle are voiced. The stories followed by these media outlets determine what the viewing public believes to be public issues. It exists separately from our governing bodies because free press is intended to provide another level of checks and balances. These public issues become more difficult to broach when news and objective reporting are interspersed with opinion and punditry. Unfortunately the "news" programs with the most viewers are also the ones with the most opinion.

By far the most popular news outlet is Fox News. The FCC introduced The Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters to devote equal, honest, and balanced coverage to the various perspectives on critical public issues, in 1949 as the television became commonplace in American households. Founded in 1980, in the twilight of the Fairness Doctrine, Fox presents its commentators as sensitive to the plight of the population who sees their way of life as besieged in modern society. While they present stories in ways that emphasize how their audience's social and political values and way of life are being undermined, their viewership belies their perceived threatened status. A 2013 report by the Pew Research Center shows primetime viewership for Fox News at roughly two million compared to MSNBC's primetime audience of eight hundred thousand (Holcomb). Notably, viewership for Fox spiked to more than two million viewers in 2009, coinciding with President Obama's inauguration. This symbol of cultural diffusion of power triggered the insecurity of conservatives.

Cultural diffusion can present obstacles as seen in President Obama's inability to build a coalition around anything in Washington, including ideas that had been bipartisan. His status as the first black president has had the effect of muzzling him on issues of race, except on a few notable occasions. During his first presidential campaign, in the aftermath of the comments made by and about Reverend Wright, Obama deftly explained his mixed heritage and the complexities of race and bias in the U.S. in a speech entitled "A More Perfect Union" (a speech that will receive more attention in the third chapter). Once in office, his impulse to embrace these complexities, at least publicly, evaporated. In July of 2009, Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested at his own home after Cambridge police responded to a call about a possible intruder. When asked to

comment on the arrest of his friend, President Obama clarified that he did “not know what role race played in [the arrest]” but then added that it seemed that “the Cambridge Police acted stupidly” during the course of this arrest. This initial blunder by a person in power with a perspective on race developed through the experience of being biracial and the son of an immigrant made any productive conversation impossible. In the end, Sergeant Crowley and Professor Gates were invited to the White House for a beer with President Obama and Vice President Biden. An opportunity to discuss the deep racial distrust dissolved into a photo op.

President Obama’s response to the shooting death of Trayvon Martin was no more effective. In an article entitled “Fear of a Black President” Ta-Nehisi Coates pinpoints Obama’s comments on Martin’s death as the impetus for the shift from treating Martin’s death as a national tragedy that “seemed uncontroversial” to a partisan free-for-all. To illustrate Coates’ point, it helps to look at the early national coverage of the event. Though Martin was shot on February 26, 2012, national coverage, including coverage by National Public Radio and Fox News began on March 19, 2012. *Fox & Friends*’ first segment on the topic was entitled “Department of Justice Opens Investigation into Case of Black Teenager Killed by Neighborhood Watch Captain.” The reporting was somber, highlighting the asymmetry, Zimmerman’s questionable actions and assumptions, and the obstacle provided by a Florida law, which affords Floridians the ability to use deadly force if they believe they are acting in self-defense. The graphics are mostly sympathetic to Martin, but some visual messages are reminders to Fox’s generally conservative and overwhelmingly white audience that this issue exists in the realm of the other. These messages include footage of a protest on a college campus, and a banner that read “Anger

over teen's death/ parents believe race a factor" which framed footage of Martin's father addressing the press, calmly expressing his pain and concern that there had been no criminal investigation three weeks after his son had died. Though they chose various points of emphasis in telling the story, before President Obama spoke, all major outlets agreed that Martin's death was a tragedy.

By March 23, President Obama commented on the story, and the quote that was picked up by every outlet was about his sympathy for Martin's parents: "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." Coates argues that this comment overtly linked the defenseless teen to the nation's first black President, who is the embodiment of black power. This reminder, according to Coates, galvanized partisan and racial divides. However, hours before conservative programming had already begun pathologizing Trayvon Martin's death as seen on *Fox & Friends* morning segment on March 23 during which Geraldo Rivera stated he believed "the hoodie [was] as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was" ("Tragedy in Florida"). This impulse to explain or justify the tragedy based on Trayvon's fashion choices and habits is unique to conservative outlets.

On the other hand, early reports on NBC (MSNBC did not report on this event on March nineteenth) consistently emphasized the need for criminal charges against Zimmerman. The opening graphic in the March nineteenth *Nightly News* segment on Martin's death featured a photo of Martin with the caption "gunned down" emphasizing Martin's status as a victim whose death requires justice. Early National Public Radio segments from *All Things Considered* focused on the impending FBI investigation, the

dubious inaction by the Sanford police department, the student protests and community outcry for justice. By March twenty-second, *All Things Considered* ran a segment focusing on the persistent racial tension in Sanford. NPR, though broadly touted as a balanced source for news, presents stories in a particular way for its audience. The NPR audience largely consists of college-educated, urbane listeners, just twenty-one percent of whom describe themselves as conservative (Pew Research Center). While the bones of the story remain the same, the point of emphasis varies from outlet to outlet, from ideological community to ideological community. The headlines in each of these national outlets stress the fact that the event of Trayvon Martin's death could have been avoided if Martin had been more respectable (from Fox's view); if Zimmerman had been more rational (according to NBC); or if Sanford, Florida were more progressive (in NPR's frame). In other words if *they* were more like *us*.

One of the more nebulous and powerful types of communities is the national community, which Benedict Anderson defines as chiefly "imagined" (Anderson 6). The concept of nationalism is nebulous for the same reasons it has become so powerful. Because the idea of a national community has risen as a result of print capitalism, it assumes all who subscribe have shared values and priorities. Formerly, gazettes, which were published by individual printers, "brought together, on the same page, *this* marriage with *that* ship, *this* price with *that* bishop," and collected the news of society and commerce to present what the members of a given community found important (Anderson 62). Those who do not share the values represented in the "national" media, those who do not share "national" culture or values remain effectively excluded.

Writing at the onset of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and well before the advent of the Internet for personal and commercial use, Anderson could not have anticipated the exacerbated effect the Internet would have on the idea of empty time. Empty time, how Anderson characterizes our current idea of time, is unaffected by the events that occur within it and progresses in a linear fashion (Anderson 25). The idea of empty time is critical to an imagined community, because an individual is constantly imagining (consciously or not) how others who he's never met are occupying their time, and naturally, he imagines they spend it in a way similar to how he spends his time. Social media like Twitter, facebook, and the innumerable blogs do not make a representative body, but they give the sense of access to one's compatriots. It may at first appear that one may need to imagine less with these media, because these media afford direct access to the occupations and interests of one's national fellows, but these informational exports are (to varying degrees) curated and decided upon, much in the way Anderson describes the juxtaposition of arbitrary headlines seemingly tied together by nothing but the time in which they occurred (33). Viewers of social media see a selected representation of the lives and concerns of others, and it is organized chronologically. Viewers effectively have to work harder to imagine the parts of our fellows' lives that remain unshared. The portions that *are* shared become amplified through reposts and retweets prompted by the support or outrage of the viewer. Because a person can choose her various outlets, she is insulated; she believes that her ideas are shared by many, and this can create a deceptively powerful sense of community. At best, social media can drive public debate, bringing counterpublics and issues that were not previously of public concern into a more visible, more audible position. At worst, it can

lead to the exposure of the concerns of a counterpublic before they have been fully articulated, leaving the members of that counterpublic vulnerable and jeopardizing the possible progress toward their goal. Once these events and issues are brought to light via social media, what ultimately determines how they are received by the mainstream public audience is the repackaging by network news.

Within any community, even among multiple communities, there will be what Foucault calls a “regime of truth” or “the types of discourse which [the society] accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault 140, 131). Foucault notes that the law (the written code and those who enforce it) often functions as a “mask for power” (140). Certainly it is an “instrument of power,” but only because it is part of the truth-making apparatus (140). Because truth has such powerful effects, the shaping of truth is the most important phenomenon that occurs within a community. As the public in the U.S. trends increasingly toward relativism, the inquiries of intellectuals have become more specific. Foucault claims that more intellectuals are occupying “the precise points where their own conditions of life and work situate them” which results in more attention paid to the specific, non-universal problems (126). Late twentieth century intellectuals have been increasingly drawn to explorations that bring them into direct contact with the public and out of the isolated world of theory or the histories of heads of state. Because of this integration, intellectuals should be chief contributors to the apparatus that develops truth. And herein lies Foucault’s challenge to the intellectuals of the late twentieth century: “The essential political problem for the intellectual... [is changing] the institutional regime and production of truth” (133).

While Foucault defines intellectuals as experts in their field, in the twenty-first century, it is useful to look to the shift in religious history as described by Olwen Hufton, Leverhulme Research Professor at the University of Oxford. Hufton characterizes religious history in the 1950s and 1960s as a study of the leaders and hierarchies of different religions, but as she pursued her graduate work which related directly to the people of the town in which she lived, she participated in the filling of a gap in religious history: the history according to the “consumer” or congregation (59). By the late twentieth century, religion is understood as “an intrinsic part of culture and a producer of culture” (59). Hufton argues that the more rooted an intellectual is in her own time and place, the more she will be able to “continue the process of dissolving the old boundaries of historical enquiry” and use their expertise not to frame a single picture, but as a lens through which to view the world (77). Studying and working with real people is useful and assembling an integrated knowledge base from many perspectives can build a more complete truth. This prospect of building a more complete truth is compelling, yet the market craves partial truths.

Truth, according to Foucault, is not stable or immutable. Looking at the media’s presentation, the public’s reaction, and the outcomes of the trials for George Zimmerman and Darren Wilson, Foucault’s hypotheses about truth emphasize the power-effects of truth that foster hegemony:

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power

which produce and sustain it, and to the effect of its power which induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth. This regime is not merely ideological or superstructural; it was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism. And it's the same regime, which, subject to certain modifications, operates in socialist countries. (133)

Conventional wisdom is a useful stand-in for "truth." It is formed based on precedent and various systems, in these racially inflected cases: the media coverage, police and FBI investigations, and jury verdicts. Truth is created by the dominant forces in a culture, yet it is subject to change based on the will of the society. Because it is not stable, intellectuals must work to divorce "the power of truth from the forms of hegemony... within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault 144). Even as the regard for and qualifications of intellectuals shift, this responsibility is paramount. Foucault argues that this task becomes more difficult because the systems that produce truth are rooted in capitalism. We see this evidenced in the ratings boost for news outlets covering racialized crime. Ratings become an obstacle in asking intellectuals to be part of the truth-making mechanism because target audiences are most faithful when they feel as though that particular outlet will offer them the greatest confirmation bias, and in particular if they feel that news outlet represents the last bastion of "people like them." Even when discerning news consumers seek dissenting opinions, they gravitate to sources that ring true (Deggans 32, 48). News outlets increasingly create this sense of banding together, which gives the audience a sense of power.

Michel Foucault articulates a view of power that is not positive or negative in and of itself, but has effects which can be either positive (promoting growth) or negative (prohibitive). He asks in an interview, “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” (119) In a separate interview, among other hypotheses about power, he articulates two that will be of interest in this study:

... that [power relation’s] interconnections delineate general conditions of domination, and this domination is organized into a more-or-less coherent and unitary strategic form; that dispersed, heteromorphus, localized procedures of power are adapted, re-inforced, and transformed by these global strategies, all this being accompanied by numerous phenomena of inertia, displacement and resistance; ...[and] that there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated into global strategies. (142)

I will first address the first portion of the hypothesis listed above. If the dominant group is mainstream white, and pro-law enforcement, then we see the multiple forms of “dispersed, heteromorphus, localized procedures of power” within the actions of the

police department, in the failure of two grand juries to indict figures in the name of public safety, and finally in the conservative media who have made an effort to pathologize the black victims and explain how the “mistake” could be made. “Inertia” exists in the repeated transgressions and the continuation of the status quo. “Resistance” manifests in the public outcry, which spread nationally with the Michael Brown case. However, displacement is a term that causes some difficulty: if it is a physics term, as the other two are, then it implies the distance covered by an object or the mass removed from a body to accommodate another mass. According to Thomas Flynn, an interpreter of Foucault, Foucault borrowed Freud’s term “displacement,” but used it to “characterize the ‘economy of power’” (Flynn 37). Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the Panopticon as the “architectural emblem for this displacement” where the “object of the relations of sovereignty [is displaced by] the relations of discipline” (Flynn 38). We see this displacement occurring where the object of the police apparatus to protect civilians is displaced by the object of punishing those they see as other. We also see displacement in the aim of the media where the goal to support an “open and civil exchange of views” is replaced by the goal to tell a story for the ratings it harvests.

Bentham’s vision of a panopticon meant to maximize one’s ability to observe and manage without the unpredictable complications caused by interactions among the observed. In his original model, the observer is central and the cells of the observed are equally visible around the circumference of the space. The observer is the authority and the observed are dependent on him. Imagine these roles are reversed: the observer (still singular) is peripheral, while the observed (still many) are in individual but not equally visible cells (think of channels, news sites, Twitter handles, or blogs). The managing

capacity of the observer, and by extension, any individual citizen, is muted. Who manages? What kind of public sphere exists when citizens are increasingly isolated?

With such isolation, a public sphere with a conception of public good becomes difficult to form. The way Habermas conceived of the public sphere is so simple and for that reason so appealing. He describes the bourgeois public sphere as a place where status markers are bracketed, so speakers may speak with one another as if they were social peers about issues that are distinctly public in a venue that is distinct from the state (37). In the US today, the public sphere does not operate in a way that fulfills any of these assumptions: if we stipulate that the public sphere is linked with the associated press, then there are a number of individuals who determine who will have access to the public sphere and who will not. If we allow that the Internet has become a new public sphere, still some issues trend while others attract the attention of only a few. Because the Internet is so egalitarian, it produces a range of issues, and while it can play a key role in determining what is spoken of within the public sphere, it is too easy for people to select their public, so hosts many separate publics rather than a cohesive, whole public. Neither of these venues operate as Habermas' ideal, but that fact begins to matter less when we consider the criticism levied upon his outline.

Nancy Fraser, along with others, questions whether the assumptions behind Habermas' idea of the public sphere are optimal in an "actually existing democracy" (37). She argues that status differentials cannot be simply bracketed. Short of eliminating them, they must be able to be spoken about. We know from Critical Race Theory that institutions are biased toward the culture that founded them, so even if individuals can

“bracket” their differences, the method of discourse cannot be culturally or socially neutral, so subordinate populations would be better served if inequalities were aired out (Henry 427-428). The benefit of placing these inequalities in plain sight can be seen in aftermath to the recent cases of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. Though the tragedy and loss of life is not possible to reverse, it prompted some frank discussions about implicit bias and how that informs the dangerous work of public safety. Because of frank discussions like these, a police force like that in Los Angeles has taken steps to overcome its crippling issues with race relations. Since the riots after Rodney King, the LAPD has made efforts to “reflect the community it serves,” now constituting “45 percent Hispanic, 13 percent African-American, 20 percent female, and a minority white male” (Sieglar). The LAPD has also announced that it intends to purchase 7,000 body cameras, though the department said that announcement was not as a result of the cases in New York or Ferguson but of their own efforts toward “better policing” (Ehrenfreund). In February of 2015, Seattle’s Police Union Chief warns her staff that they will be put on leave and appear “on the front page of *The Seattle Times*” if their social media posts are offensive or bigoted (O’Toole). While this social media monitoring does not solve the problem of bigotry, it may help, especially in a progressive city like Seattle to bring public opinion down on those who still harbor and openly display bias.

Fraser also asks if the content of the public sphere should be restricted to traditionally public concerns. She points out that many issues, like rape or domestic violence had been marked “private” to keep them out of the public eye. But as a result of the efforts of the feminist counterpublic, feminists were able to more clearly articulate why sexual violence is a public issue (Fraser 67). Fraser wrote before the rash of

professional athletes charged with domestic violence and before close attention was paid to rape on college campuses. Both of these issues keep sexual violence within the public sphere, but neither of them would have been openly discussed prior to the work of feminist counterpublics in the late twentieth century. This critique almost applies to the reporting of the Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin cases, because it was the audience of black reporters, who prompted them to write the story. However, their position as journalists within mainstream media made the stories possible. And as writers within the mainstream media, the story was allowed to break because of the “value of the story” and the “opportunity” it presented to raise particular issues (Inskeep).

One of Fraser’s main criticisms of Habermas’ ideal is that it preferences one public sphere over several competing publics. When a society has one public space for discussion, then, according to Habermas, the common good becomes clear, but as Fraser points out, this assumes that all of the public has common interests, a position which leaves no room for dissent. The mistake in Habermas’ formulation is that dominant groups take control over the content and the frame of the conversation while subordinate groups are not able to articulate fully their concerns (Fraser 66). She says that the answer to this problem is multiple *subaltern counterpublics*, which act as functional “safehouses,” a term used by Mary Louise Pratt to describe “spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (Pratt 40). Fraser argues that without these spaces, subordinate groups cannot find a voice, and while that is almost certainly true, she does not fully deal with the difficulty a counterpublic experiences when trying to “offset...the participatory privileges

enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies” (68). The idea of the “safehouse” can be misleading. In the same way that Habermas’ model of a bracketed social status is not possible, it is similarly wrongheaded to argue that any group can be devoid of status markers and dissent. Certainly there must be spaces for counterpublics to assemble, but these spaces are not inherently safe. Then, in order to penetrate the public sphere, counterpublics must have members who are also respected within the wider public to raise the issue in the public sphere.

When a more diverse population selects and delivers the news, then more issues that impact the “common good[s]” can be discussed (Habermas 38). However, national coverage, rather than local coverage rules the day. While a person imagines their nation, they also see other locales as distinctly other. National coverage is more likely to prompt a voyeuristic impulse than a civic-minded debate about local policies. This impulse was illustrated in Ferguson, which witnessed peaceful protests as well as riots by “social justice tourists” (Chappell). When all eyes are on a small city, it becomes a bit more difficult for dominant groups to practice the humility necessary to reform the practices of a community, and it becomes even more exasperating for the subordinate groups to receive no adequate response to their increasingly urgent requests. Meanwhile, rather than learn from another community’s hardship and reevaluate similar trends and issues in their own separate communities, people’s eyes are glued to the screen: heartbroken families, smashed storefronts, car fires.

At a certain point, observation gives way to experience, and individuals often struggle to evaluate the images they’ve seen. NPR’s *On the Media* is a show dedicated to

media criticism and analysis. The show's host, Brooke Gladstone, details "The Anatomy of Six Shootings." She describes it this way: First the local coverage; then, the family speaks out, inciting protests; soon after, the national coverage; attempts to explain the death followed by remarks from a national figure, and someone invokes a "national conversation" about race. Gladstone voices the positives that have come forth:

The way these stories unspool in real time and on social media...mostly works to the benefit of all concerned. First, to those long-ignored communities that suddenly have a global opportunity to be heard. And to those outside, concerned with social justice. And to those news outlets that see ratings spike and less cynically, a chance for relevant, important coverage.

But she overlooks the impact of the media on imagined communities. One of the problems with "national conversations" is that the nation only exists in a person's imagination. Most of our fellow nationals we will never meet or know or even see (Anderson 9). Yet immediately we hear echoes of President Kennedy's 1961 speech: "What unites us is far greater than what divides us." Is that true? Does it need to be true in order to shape change? As long as we think of problems as national problems, they will persist. We will only be successful in effecting change when our public sphere is more inclusive, when it represents the interests of the consumers, and when communities deal with problems at the community level.

Pluralism has won the day, or so it would seem. There are more venues to collect information from than ever before, and people gravitate toward presentations of

information that afford them the greatest degree of confirmation bias (Deggans 48). In this way individuals are afforded a greater opportunity than ever to reconstruct events to fit their idea of reality, and still they remain as part of the nation. How? Because the stories are the same—the events that are covered in the *Huffington Post* tend to be also covered by Fox News. The stories (what fills the empty time) are the same, but the coverage is different. Still there is the assumption that all the people in a nation should be interested in the same news. The fact that the news is the same is what binds a nation of multiple realities together.

Who determines if a story gets told? Journalists, editors, and increasingly readers. Looking at the coverage of the Trayvon Martin case, one of the early mainstream (read: national) reporters who picked up the story was Trymaine Lee, who works for the *Huffington Post*. Even he initially dismissed the story as “garden variety” (Gladstone). But he was urged by the readers of his blog to cover the story. Without the ability of his readers to express a clear desire and without his access to mainstream media, this case and the several others that have followed since would not have received the national attention they received. In terms of raising the issue in a way that demands attention, the national coverage has been critical, but it has prompted people to consider practices (like body cameras for police) that “demand colorblind treatment,” which will “remedy only the most flagrant forms of [racism]” (Delgado and Stefancic 136). Community-level responsibility is more effective at actually re-forming the practices that perpetuate institutional bias.

A story that received far less national attention than the other cases was that of the police shooting death of Jonathan Ferrell in Charlotte, North Carolina in September 2013. Around 2:30 a.m., Ferrell's car ran off the road and crashed into trees, and after extricating himself from the wreck, he knocked on the door of a near-by house. The homeowner called the police about the stranger who was "banging viciously" (Monroe qtd in Weiss and Collins). When police arrived on the scene, he "ran toward the officers, who tried to stop him with a Taser. Police said he continued to run toward them when Kerrick shot him" fatally (Weiss and Collins). Gladstone argues that the dearth of national attention had to do with the fact that the police department promptly indicted the officer and answered the questions of the community. It is perhaps coincidence that the police chief who answered all questions was also black, but if it is not coincidence, then here is another argument for a diffusion of power among cultural groups.

It might seem that the problem comes as a result of including race as a crucial part of the stories. The law is a widely recognized implement of power, and if it does not serve all of a populace, it cannot serve it at all. It is not simply that law enforcement does not adequately serve the black community; it does not adequately serve anyone when unarmed people and teenagers are being shot. It does not adequately serve the officers when it does not train them to approach each situation with compassion and mindfulness, and it does not serve the officers nor the community when there is so much separating those who should be protecting from those who should be protected. Consider the issues that arise once reports have been racialized: the non-black audience unconsciously identifies with those in power, who are also the aggressors. And when this happens, it becomes much more difficult to mediate a conversation about how to avoid this kind of

tragedy. Fellow civilians, instead of identifying with the slain teenager, are more likely to identify themselves with fellow whites because cultural ties bind imagined communities. And when the racial power structure is invoked, news ratings go up, and the production of truth functions to maintain the cultural hegemony. However, taking race out of the media representation would not promote equality. As Fraser says, status markers need to be present to make an honest, critical assessment of any current issue.

Foucault says the chief responsibility of intellectuals is to “detach the power of truth from the forms of hegemony... within which it operates at the present time.” Of course race plays a role in othering and in the implicit biases of all people, but a sure step toward racial equality is to know that the problem of one group *is* the problem of another. Instead of feeling unfairly disadvantaged, when there is a reform that works to offset previous privileges, the mainstream should know that the actual result is “a multiplication and re-inforcement of power-effects” (Foucault 127). Too frequently, the free press, the vehicle that should convey the truths built by intellectuals severs and distorts them, and the yolk of hegemony persists.

Chapter 2

Victims and Villains in the Village: How Public Sphere Portrayal of Victims and Villains Impacts Face-to-Face Communities

Victims have the power to galvanize change. They raise indignation, a powerful motive to act and call for action. When there is a victim, there is always a perpetrator. In the archetypal tragedies of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, the perpetrators were identified immediately: George Zimmerman, a white-Hispanic neighborhood watch volunteer, and Darren Wilson, a white police officer. After the initial shock of the first national reports, each story became more complicated. Many began to question—are the roles so clear-cut? In these cases, were the shooters victims of circumstance? Could they each have been *the* victim if they had not fired? When groups cannot agree about who the victim is, discussion and courses of action become fraught. Both sides fall into a cycle of vilification, which inhibits meaningful progress in policy and procedure that would prevent similar situations in the future. Of course both of these incidents earned broad national coverage, and the issue of race and excessive force is now a fixture of public sphere discourse as similar cases continue to develop, and several mediators and public officials attempt to wade into the fray to put forth suggestions to hold officers more accountable or train law enforcement in a more effective way. However, the ideological sides are quick to echo these voices, distorting them with added reverberations. What is the impact of this kind of divided dialogue on real people within real face-to-face communities? We have become more accustomed to the ideological communities that develop through social media and cable news channels, but what about the physical

communities we move through every day in our neighborhoods, occupations, and schools?

Working at a Foxborough Regional Charter School whose demographics have changed rapidly in the last five years, and even more over the eight years I have taught there, has provided me a unique perspective on interactions among students and teachers of different ethnic, economic, and cultural backgrounds. When I began teaching middle and high school English in 2007, the pupils came from mostly white middle class families. Today, I teach only in the high school, which is now mostly black, and our black population is made up mostly of Haitian-American and Nigerian-American students who are second or third generation U.S. citizens. Over the last five years, the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch has increased by nearly three hundred percent; now, over twenty-five percent of the students at our school qualify for free or reduced lunch (Griffin). These changes have come suddenly and have prompted various meetings dedicated to engaging productively across cultures and deescalating situations with students. The national coverage of the cases of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown have made an impact on communities nation-wide, but because of the heterogeneous makeup of our student population, the conversations among students and staff reflect this heterogeneity. The national coverage of these incidents has certainly been an opportunity for progress because it has prompted a conversation and continues to focus attention on this specific inequity. However, looking at the civic and social impacts of victimhood as articulated by Sandra Walklate and the rhetorical effects of vilification based on Marsha Vanderford's work, only a radical change in our news consumption can reverse the

entrenchment and promote meaningful dialogue that produces real community-level change.

According to P. J. Henry, institutions will always have a bias toward the culture that founded them, and so it is telling that formal police forces arose in the US during the 1800s, when immigration and class tensions produced an environment in which “the business elites and the middle class of American cities increasingly feared for the stability of the society” (Henry 427-428; Holmes 21). The development of the police force under these circumstances led to a force that was dedicated to “control[ing] crime” (especially among the poorer, ethnic, and black communities) rather than simply “maintaining order” (Holmes 24). A shift in focus like this is caused by the sense that one’s state of existence may radically and irrevocably change. This sense is what Walklate calls “ontological insecurity” (92). Given this history, it is no mystery that minority communities have little trust in law enforcement. This mistrust is keenly felt throughout the law enforcement community, but often escapes the attention of civilian whites who live in mostly white communities. In my parents’ kitchen a news segment on the grand jury investigation of Darren Wilson runs as we prepare dinner. My father, a retired police officer of thirty years, reacted, “I never hear [the media] talk about the discrimination officers face.” Here are two sides, both interested in safety, both suspicious of the other, and both ignited by what they hear and see on the news.

In her article “Imagining the Crime Victim: The Rhetoric of Victimhood as a Source of Oppression,” Walklate investigates how victimhood is “a cultural process and a claim to status” as well as a vehicle of oppression, which serves the interests of the

“hegemonic state” (97, 96). To be able to claim victimhood is to assert that a person or group has been wronged and that that person or group expects to be vindicated. In this sense, the national attention these white-on-black cases of police brutality have received represents such a claim to justice for the black community. These cases have provided seemingly simple story lines that have resulted in wide-spread support for the victims. Yet, as each story developed in the national media, the roles became less clear-cut. And as different segments of the population began to question who the real victim was, the hegemonic impact of victimhood became clearer.

Walklate discusses the rise of victim support groups specifically in England and Wales, but the same phenomenon exists in the U.S. Cable news has a penchant for covering violence, hence the expression “If it bleeds, it leads,” and this coverage has produced an environment in which people will support “victimization prevention policy rather than crime prevention policy” as they feel increasingly vulnerable (Walklate 92). Two separate “imagined political communities” with which citizens identify become clear by looking at the fundraising efforts of the parties involved particularly in the case of Darren Wilson and Michael Brown (Walklate 96). These fundraising sites also reveal the dominant group. The Darren Wilson fund on GoFundMe amassed more than 190,000 dollars from 4,581 donors in just four days, while in twice that time, the Brown Family Fund had collected 148,000 dollars from almost 5,500 donors. This financial support did not match the physical rallies held by both sides; pro-Wilson “gatherings [were] significantly smaller than the protests around Brown’s death” (Hanrahan). For Wilson supporters, he is a officer who was put in a difficult position and was acting in self defense. The overwhelmingly quick response signifies just how strongly people identified

with Officer Wilson. On the other hand, the support for Michael Brown was hardly anemic. For one thing, these contributions were expressly not for their legal expenses, nor was Michael Brown supporting his family, and the number of physical supporters around the country is testament to not just his status as a victim but also to how many people identify with him and his family (Hanrahan). When media present the case as polarized rather than an issue of public health and safety, they encourage people to take a side, which is not necessarily the same as encouraging people to join a dialogue that will lead to reforms to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

In an increasingly diverse society, or in a community that is experiencing changes in its demographics, “ontological insecurity” rises, and along with it, vindictiveness (Walklate 92). This insecurity often results in a more punitive criminal justice system and a push to preserve the “public interest” (95). But who decides what the “public interest” is? Walklate discusses three competing ideas of the public interest:

The first view is of the public as taxpayers, whose interests are equated with economy, efficiency, and effectiveness and are presumed to have an antagonistic relationship with non-taxpayers. The second view is of the public as consumers, as active choice makers within the public services. ... The last view of the public, is one of a community of diverse interests. (95)

Opposed to these three ideas stands a conception of the public good that “is not reducible to their aggregate value for each member of society, but what they are worth to everyone together” (Walklate 95). In this view, the individual benefits may be at odds with the public interest. Because of the emphasis on personal freedom in the U.S., this concept is

not well-received, especially when sharp divisions exist among residents of the same physical community as they do in Sanford, Florida or Ferguson, Missouri. Because these different groups imagine themselves as part of distinct political communities, they cannot allow that a policy in the interest of the other is in their own interest as well. Instead, the group with the most power (in this case using Hannah Arendt's definition "ability to act in concert") and authority (in Arendt's definition, "unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey") will seek to protect what it views as its interests and will disregard what is best for all. Walklate furthers this line of thinking when she invokes Will Hutton's critique on American conservatism:

It is not just a matter of accepting that the state can and should act to build an infrastructure of justice that diminishes inequality, equalizes opportunity, and tries to enlarge individual's capacity for self-respect. It is as the German philosopher Hannah Arendt argues about needing a public realm to allow the full flowering of our human sensibilities. For taken to its limits, a society peopled only by conservative "unencumbered selves," jealously guarding their individual liberties and privacy, is a denial of the human urge for association and meaning. (qtd in Walklate 97)

The tendency for Americans, and to a greater extent, conservatives, to focus on individual freedoms and interests is a substantial stumbling block when we try as a nation to talk about the collective interest. Without a consensus on who the victim of a particular crime or incident is, groups become balkanized, and they wield vilifying rhetoric to deepen the divide.

Marsha Vanderford studies the vilification rhetoric of pro-life and pro-choice groups in Minnesota between 1973 and 1980 to learn about the results of vilification in terms of motivation for a group. She concludes that while the groups share a great deal in common in terms of their passion, belief in democracy, and their rhetorical strategies, they are unable to even attempt “genuine communication” because of their commitment to the vilification of their opponent (166). Because of the asymmetry of the power dynamic, the key groups involved after the tragedies in Sanford and Ferguson employ different rhetorical strategies to vilify the other group, but the effect is the same: each side is galvanized to act and protest but not to engage with the other side to find a solution.

Vanderford names four aspects of vilification that help to motivate a group. The first aspect is to “formulate a specific adversarial force,” which rallies and focuses a group’s energies (166). The organization Black Lives Matter (BLM) formed as a result of George Zimmerman’s acquittal in July of 2013. On BLM’s initial website¹, they positively define their own “vision for a new America” and demands. The “vision for a new America” begins with calling for “justice for Michael Brown,” “freedom for our communities,” and “full recognition of our human rights.” The strategy of defining one’s own group is distinct from attacking the opponent. In this case, the opponents exist in the

¹ Black Lives Matter’s website was updated October 1, 2015. The updated version replaced the “national demands” and “vision for a new America” with navigation links to “Who We Are,” which includes the sub-headings “About” “Herstory,” and “Guiding Principles,” “What We Believe,” and “How You Can Help.” These links contain content that emphasizes inclusion and nonviolence in contrast to the emphasis on jarring statistics and generally more militant tone of the initial website. Ostensibly, this change is in line with their slogan “Not a Moment, but a Movement.”

realm of white privilege, and may not be easily isolated without sounding radical.

However, the five of six “National Demands” focus on changes to local law enforcement. While “local law enforcement” is more specific than the multitude of groups that would have to change to fulfill BLM’s new vision, it hardly constitutes the kind of specificity Vanderford identifies in her study. The negative space left by BLM’s articulation of their vision is where the vilification resides: what kind of group or people would be opposed in any way to freedom and human rights? Because BLM is challenging the status quo, the group must articulate its message in a way that will not alienate potential supporters and sympathizers.

A group may be more specific about their target when that target enjoys less mainstream support. Defenders of law enforcement and the decisions reached by the jury and grand jury in Sanford and Ferguson respectively employ a specification that bears much more resemblance to the type of vilification Vanderford describes. They are not organized in one group regarding this single issue. Due to the tenor of the verdicts, it is likely that these people do not see an urgent need to unite and act. However, despite this lack of urgency, or perhaps because of it, conservatives and law enforcement spokespeople target BLM and Reverend Al Sharpton as instigators of racial outrage. Specifically, *The New York Post* cartoonist Michael Ramirez, and Patrick Lynch of the Patrolman’s Benevolent Association explicitly or implicitly blamed Sharpton and BLM respectively for the point-blank shooting of two officers in Brooklyn in December of 2014. Fingering a spokesperson like Sharpton, who has a suspect record in the minds of many white Americans or a group like BLM, which, despite its commitment to peaceful protests and its modest demands, is easily portrayed as militant, is sure to cultivate fear

and urgency in spite of the friendly verdicts handed down by the justice system. Further, describing the motives of the opponent helps to shape each side's argument for its supporters.

Another aspect of vilification according to Vanderford involves attributing “diabolical motives to foes” (166). The threat presented by each side in the eyes of the other constitutes the clearest aspect of vilification throughout this particular issue. Because violence is central to this issue, lives are at stake. From the BLM perspective, the threat of police brutality and deprivation of justice is immediate and ubiquitous. The statistics that appear on the homepage of the organization² emphasize the danger faced by blacks: “Every 28 hours, a black man, woman, or child is murdered by police or vigilante law enforcement.” Two rhetorical choices are worth noting. The decision to write, “is murdered” rather than “is killed by,” suggests cold-blooded intention, which is always a crime. In addition, the conjunction “or” typically sets apart alternatives, but here the “or” links “police” and “vigilante law enforcement” as similar and equally threatening. The collapsing of these two groups even suggests that so-called law enforcement operates outside of the law. The other two statistics concern the poverty rate among black women and the life expectancy of a black transgender woman. While the group's focus is not exclusively on police brutality, they highlight a special threat that comes under the auspices of public safety.

² Statistics are presented on the updated page but require the user to scroll down considerably and move the mouse over different icons to view the various statistics; whereas, on the initial homepage, the statistics dominated the content section and automatically rotated, calling immediate attention to the threats blacks face.

When groups emphasize the harm that can come to the audience, its community, and its valued institutions, their supporters are more likely to show support in a tangible way (Walter 276). While the visceral threat is more pronounced in BLM rhetoric, conservatives focus on the violence done to American values and institutions. For conservatives, BLM does not represent an organization that has grown out of centuries of oppression, nor does it represent an organization that values justice, peace or community support. For its critics, it is a group that is against the rule of law and against peaceful community life as portrayed in a political cartoon by Bob Gorrell on the *Western Journalism's* site. This cartoon features a man identified as a "Baltimore looter" holding a sign that says, "#BLACKLIVESMATTER (but police, private property, and public safety DON'T!)." In another political cartoon by Michael Ramirez and published in *Investor's Business Daily* and the *National Review Online*, Sharpton is the tree from which "Truth" is lynched on four separate occasions: "Tawana Brawley Hoax," "Crown Heights," "Freddie's Fashion Mart," and "Zimmerman Trial." The implication is that Sharpton is wrong about the cases in which he becomes engaged, and perhaps he becomes involved not as an activist but as a rabble-rouser. Further, Sharpton is portrayed as being for a brand of justice that falls outside the law. The decision to depict lynching, a practice responsible for the deaths of thousands of blacks in the U.S., emphasizes racial overtones and, for a conservative audience, conveys the "reverse racism" they believe exists (Bonilla-Silva 4). These depictions essentially say that "justice" as defined by BLM and Sharpton can only come at the expense of Truth.

The intention and the lawlessness each group attributes to the other augments each side's ability to "cast opponents in an exclusively negative light" (Vanderford 167).

Though Black Lives Matter articulates its vision and demands in affirmative statements, they are still successful at constructing negative identity for their opponents. Their first national demand is the “de-militarization of local law enforcement across the country.” The opposite view would be supportive of a military police state. Their second demand calls for “a comprehensive review of systemic abuses by local police departments, including the publication of data relating to racially biased policing, and the development of best practices,” which all but states that law enforcement today is corrupt and if not racist, then racially biased. The opponents of these demands are painted in a consistently negative light, and BLM associates opponents with being out of step with genuine American values. For the supporters of Black Lives Matter, police are portrayed not as men and women who are dedicated to keeping communities safe but as officers who routinely abuse their authority without any fear of consequence.

For conservatives, casting the opponent in a negative light is also delicately done. Even moderate media groups engage in micro-aggressions and in pathologizing the lifestyles of black youth. The decision to allow the toxicology report, which revealed that Trayvon Martin had marijuana in his system, transformed Trayvon from “a seventeen year old who was going to get Skittles” to a person “who has drugs in his system... [with the] kind of lifestyle that uses marijuana” (Sloane). The graphic in the backdrop of CNN’s segment announcing that the toxicology report would be admitted included a collage of photographs pertaining to the trial. The two that frame Wolf Blitzer are striking: to the right, a picture of Zimmerman’s head wound while to the left, a picture of Martin as a young boy overlaid by a picture of him as a teen with a sideways baseball cap and a gold chain. While his fashion choices are hardly hazardous, they are not shared by

Blitzer's audience, which, like most cable news consumers, is overwhelmingly white and "center-right." To them, Martin's clothes bear some of the hallmarks of a thug. The impulse to highlight the teen-like behavior of a black teen is subtle but effective in casting the victim in a negative light. The combination of images and verbal content suggests that Martin invited the confrontation that led to his death.

More conservative venues are less subtle when they accuse individual spokespeople of being "anti-democratic," "violence-advocating," and thirsty for media attention. The website *Newsbusters*, a project dedicated to "exposing and neutralizing the media's liberal bias," comments on a 2015 speech by Melissa Harris-Perry, a professor of Political Science and African-American Studies and the anchor of her own show on MSNBC. She gave the speech at Cornell University at the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Commemorative Lecture, and she is criticized by Tom Blumer of *Newsbusters* for being "anti-democratic [and] violence-advocating" for voicing that she "hoped [Martin] whopped the shit out of George Zimmerman" and stating that "we must break bodies to form a more perfect union" (Blumer). Sound bites like these from a public persona like Harris-Perry provide evidence to conservatives that the influential people who share the thinking of groups like BLM promote extra-democratic means to achieve their goals. Blumer also quotes Casey Breznick's review of the event, which was posted in "Cornell's only conservative and libertarian publication" in which he notes, "this event was really just about Harris-Perry, and not Dr. King" (Blumer). For conservatives, an influential and very public supporter of BLM like Harris-Perry loses all credibility because they perceive her as self-interested, opportunistic, and un-American, instead of genuinely passionate about the issues of race and justice. While, as Vanderford noted in her study, both groups

care deeply about the issue, the fact that each paints the other in an “exclusively negative light” discourages each side from collaborating with members of the other side to find a solution.

The last aspect Vanderford describes as part of the rhetoric of vilification is the tendency to “magnify the opponents’ power” (167). As Vanderford does not supply an explicit definition of power, I will look to Hannah Arendt’s definition of power from her book *On Violence*:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert.

Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is “in power” we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. (44)

Based on Arendt’s definition, which works well with Foucault’s conceptions about power, it seems impossible from the BLM perspective to overstate the institutional support, which amounts to power, held by local law enforcement. Even as the Justice Department investigated the Ferguson Police Department and set out new guidelines to curb racial profiling by federal law enforcement, BLM says on its website that these investigations “do not go far enough.” The main source of magnification comes from the generalization that all local law enforcement officers are racist. The number of incidents involving racial bias is alarming, but BLM makes the support for some officers’ use of lethal force seem overwhelming by generalizing the practices of all local law enforcement.

The effect of conservatives' magnification of the power of the BLM movement is very clear to a conservative audience, but because conservative values are empirically dominant, this magnification is difficult to see from a disinterested perspective. Fox News consistently discusses the "liberal media bias" and points out that the press sensationalizes these types of stories for ratings. Media coverage is tantamount to support for the BLM movement, because attention drawn to these cases provides a platform for people to address the multitude of issues that lead to such tragic outcomes. By naming well-known advocates like Sharpton and Harris-Perry, conservatives show that BLM has the support of affluent people with access to mainstream media. *The Washington Times* goes so far as to say that one "liberal billionaire...is at the financial center of the Ferguson protest movement" (Riddell). Further, Fox's coverage of the protests and riots in Ferguson magnify the power of the black community in Ferguson, but does not specifically identify BLM. *Hannity's* coverage of the protests in Ferguson involved a split-screen showing an interview with St. Louis Alderman Antonio French, describing a "beautiful" night of peaceful protest and the optimism brought by an address from Captain Johnson (also black) juxtaposed with inflammatory images of protesters in the streets of Ferguson as well as the destruction of property and looting (Tantaros). Juxtaposing such opposite versions of what was happening "on the ground" is a cheap way of providing the "fair and balanced" coverage Fox promises its audience. Regardless of whether the producers intended to undermine French's perspective, the U.S. has a visual culture, and the audience is likely to gravitate toward the video footage and photographs rather than internalize the words of a witness. This coverage emphasizes the destruction for which the black community, and by extension BLM, is responsible.

According to Neil Smelser, the audience must believe that the threat can be defeated, which appears to contradict the purpose of magnifying an opponent's power (Smelser 94-100). Conservatives thus couple the power of BLM and the black community with evidence that it can be easily challenged: the attention, while wide-spread, is sensationalized; the people of influence are few; and the protests and riots, rather than signifying a genuine outcry for justice, are agitated by these few influential people. This paradoxical combination is key to motivating swift action to neutralize the impact of the force that challenges the status quo.

A few groups have come into being to support Zimmerman and Wilson. Those groups have done so expressly for the purpose of raising money, without any mention of a goal outside of "showing support" for that person or group. Vilification is virtually absent from the official websites of the groups raising money to support Zimmerman, Wilson, and police in general. While the sites' comments sections have been host to hateful comments made by some of their supporters, these are not official positions held by these groups, and the most egregious were promptly removed. Most interesting, the site for Blue Lives Matter, which began raising money in December of 2014 in response to the shooting deaths of two Brooklyn patrol officers, simply says, "Police lives these days are very difficult and stressful." The fact that a dominant group does not explicitly list its goals should not come as a surprise; part of how hegemony works is dependent upon the majority of people anticipating and tacitly understanding the goal of the dominant group. The reticence and vague allusions stand in stark contrast to the specific grievances of BLM, and this rhetorical choice highlights the asymmetry of the power dynamics between the parties involved in this issue.

When supporters of each side eagerly don such thick blinders, they overlook the basic interests of their opponent. Without acknowledging that their perceived foe is also interested in supporting safe communities and protecting democratic values and processes, each side deprives the other of the true motives behind their actions. Actors may ultimately disagree over whether an action produced the desired result or was wise to begin with, but by robbing the actor of his own reason in an attempt to win the rhetorical war, each side clouds the field and continues to advance the conflict, even as the battle lines and boundaries fade. This issue is importantly different from the Pro-Choice, Pro-Life debate because the debate centers around racial bias and corruption. Neither side can speak aggressively about defeating the other without being seen as a violent anarchist or racist, yet neither side uses rhetoric that make a solutions-based conversation possible. Even members of a shared community who have different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds struggle to discuss the issue effectively.

The school in which I teach is a compelling study in communities—it is a regional school, so the students do not have many shared experiences with their neighborhood, and while it is diverse, it's also relatively small, with roughly 300 students in the high school. I conducted an anonymous survey through which I sought to learn about tenth and eleventh grade students' understanding of political bias in media, their views on these cases, and how these cases impacted their view of their community. Ninety-four percent of students surveyed indicated that they strongly or somewhat agree that “the reporting of these cases is important,” which tells me that they feel a sense of justice even in the telling of another side that has often been unheard. One student, who had indicated that (s)he “somewhat disagreed that the reporting of these cases was important,” wrote in

explanation that the reporting is “over-emphasizing these cases, making them appear much more frequent than they actually are.” This student attempted to weave in the idea that major media outlets experience higher ratings by emphasizing this type of case, but it wasn’t clear the extent to which (s)he was aware of the legacy of unreported crimes against blacks. A bit more jarring is that despite the support they feel in a school where their teachers do not mirror the cultural backgrounds of the students, just thirty-five percent of students surveyed thought “Racial discrimination will be eliminated in my lifetime.” Without a belief that it can be eliminated, working toward that goal is all the more difficult.

Eighty-five percent of students surveyed indicated that “the reporting of these cases impacted their view of their community,” and when asked to explain their response to that statement, several students included specific comments such as “I now think the police are racist” or “I am afraid [being shot] could happen to someone like me.” Surveying teenagers, to me, provides a decent barometer of the kinds of conversations going on in their homes or among their friends, either over meals or through Twitter and other social media outlets. They are less likely to arrive at and grapple with the nuances of a problem, especially if their source fails to prioritize complexity. On the other hand, the survey was meant to be a dipstick to see what truth came most easily to students, so they can be forgiven for generalizing, but an initial reaction is useful knowledge.

Somewhat less conclusive is the fact that only forty-seven percent of students indicated that “people in positions of authority in my community share my view of these cases.” This serves to show that whatever their view, they largely do not feel that it’s

shared or supported by those, whom the student views as in a position of authority. But without knowing about what kind of authority they were thinking or what their view is, it's difficult to draw any other conclusion from that statistic. As the questions required more definition (for instance what kind of authority?) there was less consensus, probably due to the heterogeneous way students were approaching the questions. I did not clarify terms like authority, community, or interest because I felt that to define those things would be to coach their answer. Especially where they were given a chance to explain their rating, I felt I could get a clearer understanding of their thinking if I let that heterogeneous approach take place.

What was clear to me through these surveys is the simultaneous beliefs that the reporting of these cases is important, but the dubious way most students regard the major news outlets. Many students wrote comments like "they're all biased, anyway" or "I just ask my Dad" unprompted in the margin next to the section that was primarily about their news consumption. Despite their distrust of media, it seems that they are internalizing the polarized rhetoric. All adults, intellectual and layman alike, bear a responsibility to help young people see that oversimplifying exacerbates a complex problem. If the problem is a mountain, oversimplifying obscures the switchbacks, so all that can be seen is a tractionless incline.

Chapter 3

The Jeremiad and Other Healing Rhetorics that Spur(red) Progress toward Racial Equality

No culture is static, and yet certain aspects become mainstays. In the U.S., we carry with us a typology that tells us we live in the Promised Land and that the oft-professed “nation of immigrants,” has been chosen from among the other nations to practice democracy and celebrate the fruits of an egalitarian society. While today, this saying amounts to a metaphor, for the Puritans, their errand was to maintain the kingdom of God on earth, specifically in Massachusetts (Bercovitch 40). They left England to begin their own colony, which would be free from the corruption that plagued England (Bercovitch 38). When John Winthrop delivered his speech to the passengers aboard the *Arbella*, his “city upon a hill” was to be a model for the world, and because these colonists wedded religious and secular history, this legacy has become part of the fabric of American secular life. This type of speech is known as the jeremiad, named for the biblical prophet, Jeremiah, who warned of Jerusalem’s destruction because of Israel’s failure to keep their “national covenant” with God (Bercovitch 32). For Christians, and especially Puritans, Jeremiah speaks not only to the literal Israelites, but also to the “*spiritual* Israel, the entire community of the elect, past, present, and to come” with whom a new covenant will be established (Bercovitch 32). In American civic life, this legacy has persisted in the form of American exceptionalism. At nearly every major juncture in our relatively short history, the jeremiad has prompted national change.

The Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement mark the peaks of progress toward racial equality in the United States. At both of these crucial points, the jeremiad was

critical in forcing mainstream Americans to examine their actions and their consciences. Black jeremiahs have prodded white Americans to adopt legislation that affords essential rights to blacks; however, true change affords more than the illusion of equal opportunity. While the jeremiad still offers a popular template for public remarks, its impact has lessened. The goal of racial equality involves a redefinition of an individual's imagined community to align more closely with their physical community.

The jeremiad has a long tradition in American society, reaching back to "A Model of Christian Charity" by John Winthrop, and it was a speech that was easily adapted into African American oratory, reaching back to Frederick Douglass. In his book *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, David Howard-Pitney studies the jeremiads of several black leaders beginning with Fredrick Douglass and closing with Martin Luther King Jr. and examines the mainstream responses to these speeches. Howard-Pitney asserts that the Afro-American Jeremiad is "both radical and conservative" because it "affirms normative American social beliefs" and "helps sustain the current order" (186). Further, black jeremiahs have positioned the black community as "a chosen people within a chosen nation," without which the United States can never fulfill its promise (Howard-Pitney 64).

The Civil War did not begin with the express purpose of ending slavery, and without the influence of Frederick Douglass, slavery may have continued to exist in a restricted portion of the country. Along with his private meetings with President Lincoln, Douglass frequently gave speeches to varied audiences, and he would tailor his remarks to each one because he believed:

There are some things which ought to be said to colored people in the

peculiar circumstances in which they are placed, that can be said more effectively among ourselves, without the presence of white persons. We are the oppressed, the whites are the oppressors, and the language I would address to the one is not always suited to the other. (Howard-Pitney 20-21)

Without this sensitivity to his audience, his message may have been muddled or viewed as too extreme even by sympathetic whites. In taking his audience into consideration, he was able to arouse Northern disapproval of slavery as an abomination to the promise of liberty, a mortal sin, and the “main cause of contemporary national declension” (39). The disapproval of the Northern constituency encouraged the evolution of Lincoln’s own opinion on the matter of slavery, and while the Emancipation Proclamation may have been motivated by military needs, it made clear the position of the executive branch. Moving the needle of public opinion on any issue is easier when a clear division exists in the behavior or the mindset of the opposing parties.

For the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement the factions and their differences were regional. Northern abolitionists and Southern apologists for slavery held fundamentally divergent views of slavery, and the worst offences of Jim Crow were exclusively in the south. Initially King spoke to mostly black crowds; however, the white reporters quickly became intrigued by his oratory style and broad references (Howard-Pitney 140). The media coverage, which focused on King, juxtaposed non-violent black protests with violent responses by white racists for a distant audience (Howard-Pitney 140). This presentation helped to generate public sympathy and support for abolishing segregation and Jim Crow laws. “King directed most of his jeremiadic rhetoric toward whites,” (Howard-Pitney 145) and in these speeches, he castigated whites for their

complicity in “violating their own democratic and Christian values” (142) but it also served to “inspire and motivate blacks” (Howard-Pitney 145). King viewed federal legislation as the most effective means for lasting change—the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) campaigned locally, specifically in Birmingham and Selma, to attract national attention and move public opinion to move the federal government (147-150). The high watermark for the Civil Rights Movement was the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, but by the time the Civil Rights Act was passed, King was already becoming less and less hopeful that true equality would be realized.

An especially telling example of the importance of regional pressure is King’s failed Chicago Freedom Movement. In light of the focus on the flagrant racism of the South, growing frustration among urban blacks yielded “Black Power” a “vague and emotionally charged slogan” open to any means to achieve their goals (Howard-Pitney 162). The lack of commitment to nonviolence made King’s work more difficult, and the hostile response from white Chicagoans shocked King (164). Condemning the actions of others is much easier than undergoing reform in one’s own community, especially in the glare of national attention. Between his shift to focus on the plight of northern blacks and his increasing emphasis on the need for changes that would promote economic equality, King’s message would be received by increasingly reluctant ears. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act, when King was beginning, as he believed, to really drive at the root causes of inequality, he lost influence with President Johnson. Losing influence over the executive branch as his favor among blacks and sympathetic whites waned, King became increasingly doubtful about the implementation of policies that would promote economic

equality (Howard-Pitney 166-167). The movement toward racial equality under the law has been achieved by federal legislation brought about by mainstream northern public opinion.

Douglass and King as black jeremiahs begin with the basic rights accorded to all Americans and as they gain traction, their emphasis falls on the economic injustices faced by blacks in the U.S., and when each made this shift is when each lost his effectiveness as a driver of public opinion (Howard-Pitney 186-187). Both Douglass and King had the ear of the President, and they could aggressively advocate for black civil rights, and because of their effectiveness as spokesmen, their influence yielded change spearheaded by the Executive Branch. A distribution of power within the Executive Branch among minorities, particularly blacks, should logically lead to surer safeguards for civil liberties. However, when the distribution of power is confused with the end of racial strife, it effectively muzzles the black Executive on issues of race.

This effect has been evident throughout President Obama's presidency beginning with his response to Professor Gates' arrest and holding steady through the mounting cases of the use of fatal force against blacks by white police officers. Importantly, as a candidate, Obama was not silent on issues of race. Due to decontextualized remarks by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, then Candidate Obama took the opportunity to give a speech centered explicitly on race relations. "A More Perfect Union" was delivered in Philadelphia at the National Constitution Center on March 18, 2008. This speech is a jeremiad in all of the hallmarks: American exceptionalism, two alternate futures, the current declension, and the ultimate optimism that the American people will do what is right to fulfill their destiny as a chosen nation. However, the force and effect of this

jeremiad is moot because its purpose is split. It is a speech that calls for a revisioning of race in America, but it is a campaign speech, so its primary purpose is to advance the candidate's campaign.

Candidate Obama begins his speech with temporal markers, referencing the constitution, the "original sin of slavery," and the controversy that provoked the Civil War. Beginning this way, affords him the opportunity to demonstrate that his understanding of the nation's promise is in step with that of his mainstream audience. He furthers this connection by explicitly stating that "we have common hopes" for the future of our nation. He segues seamlessly into his reverence for the American promise when he says, "In no other country on earth is my story even possible." This reminder of American exceptionalism is almost congratulatory. It prompts the audience to see how far he has come as an individual and by extension, how far the country has come in terms of providing opportunity for and promoting the success of marginalized people. Immediately after, he admonishes the audience not to view his candidacy "through a purely racial lens" and indirectly lays blame on the various media outlets for emphasizing the issue of race throughout the campaign. The declension he cites is the "particularly divisive" examination of the impact of race in the campaign. After glossing over the remarks of some conservatives that imply that his "campaign is an exercise in affirmative action," he focuses on the comments of his former pastor as ones that "are divisive in a time where we need unity." But in condemning the pastor, he fleshes out the complex character of Reverend Wright. The declension he cites is the over simplification and the thirst for racial controversy. The damned alternative would be to continue these divisive

behaviors, which would effectively prevent the nation from solving problems that impact every American citizen.

On the other hand, the favorable alternative is to embrace “the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through.” To do that, he says, “requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point.” He says, “we do not need to recite the history of racial injustice,” but he goes on to attribute the causes of “so many of the disparities that exist” between the black community and the “larger American community” to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. He then enumerates the major causes of racial strife: segregated schools, legalized discrimination and exclusion from various residential areas, occupations, and unions, and the de facto neglect that many black neighborhoods experienced and continue to experience. He allows that many blacks have earned “a piece of the American Dream,” but frames the frustrations of blacks as a generational problem. Framing it this way encourages mainstream Americans to believe that racial divisions may dissolve with time. Framing the bitterness that stems from racial experiences as a generational issue also affords him the opportunity to rationalize their anger without criticizing current and ongoing contributing factors. He also validates the frustrations and anger of “working and middle class Americans” who feel that advances for other populations “come at [their] expense.” Interestingly, politicians and media receive the brunt of the blame for exacerbating the racial fears and “dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as political correctness.” In the end, Obama suggests that working together to solve “quintessentially American” problems “requires the belief that society can change.” Building from the necessity of optimism and drawing on the changes the nation has already implemented, he outlines actions that need to be

taken by white Americans. Obama's fluid use of the first person plural makes these actions seem completely natural and not really related to race, "investing in *our* schools, in *our* communities, by enforcing *our* civil rights laws, and ensuring fairness in *our* criminal justice system, by providing this generation ladders of opportunity to that were unavailable for previous generations" (my emphasis). Depending on the audience member, that pronouns can be replaced by "black" or by "American." This choice to leave these specific actions open to interpretation is politically expedient but ineffective in moving mainstream Americans to acknowledge the real disparity between their experience and the experience of many American blacks let alone the causes of this disparity. Obama's optimism is comforting, and his support for a solution that does not center on race comes perilously close to the color-blind approach so often advocated by conservatives.

This jeremiad does not share the primary purpose of promoting equality. The message about acknowledging racial injustice in contemporary American life is a by-product of Obama's primary goal of putting the comments of his former pastor to rest. As civil rights leaders, eradicating inequalities was the prime motivation for Douglass and King. As a politician, Obama is motivated by myriad factors, and though he acknowledged the symbolic significance of his candidacy, he was not running a racial campaign. Much has been written about the impact of his campaign on race relations, but here I want to focus on the relatively deft way he raised the issue of inequality while affording the audience a comfortable way to contribute to the solution—by doing what they already believe is good for themselves. It may be cynical to point to the uniting message in this speech, but this uniting message is often set up as an either-or:

We can tackle race only as spectacle... We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

That is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, "Not this time."

In this context, he implies that a vote for him is tantamount to taking a step toward understanding the complexities of race in twenty-first century America or at least a step away from the stereotyping that typifies American life. As a candidate, Obama's power is not fully established, and even as Commander in Chief, his power is mitigated by an obstinate Congress. In other words, it is safe to elect and seemingly empower a black man as president, but using Arendt's definition of power "the ability to act in concert," we see in truth just how willing Americans are to distribute power to those with differing cultural backgrounds. A strong message about race can no longer come in the form of a national address or in national legislation.

More recently, Senator Elizabeth Warren delivered a jeremiad about racial inequality at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute. In her capacity as a white female Senator presenting to a fairly small audience, she risks relatively little by voicing full-throated

support for the Black Lives Matter movement. She focuses on the topics of violence, voting, and economic injustice, and says that “we have made real progress... but we have not made ENOUGH progress” (Warren). She departs from the typical American jeremiad in two ways: First, she does not outline two possible futures. If Americans fail to “make necessary trouble” to correct the current wrongs, the wrongs will simply persist. She paints the status quo as shockingly un-American; in her speech, America is a place where “peaceful, unarmed protestors have been beaten. Journalists have been jailed. And, in some cities, white vigilantes with weapons freely walk the streets” (Warren). Second, her appeals to American exceptionalism are understated. One appears at the close of her focus on violence when she avows, “This is America, not a war zone.” She expects her audience to fill in the American ideal of a police force that is not militarized. Warren confirms that the work will only be done when “every American citizen enjoys the conditions of freedom.” This speech, partly because of her delivery, which is quick and efficient, doesn’t ring with the pathos commonly found in campaign speeches. Then again, she wasn’t campaigning. When jeremiads are divorced from the business of running for office, they carry more weight. Office holders can take risks in speeches that are taboo for office seekers. They can be specific about the means to correct the current wrongs, and they can afford to challenge and possibly alienate the audience by inducing the guilt or new awareness that will prompt action. Further, the most successful jeremiads are given to a particular constituency. Audience is everything. A speaker can tailor their remarks as Frederick Douglass did, but when an audience belongs together in a more immediate way, it can take up the challenge as a group to work to make the changes themselves.

When people create something together, there is a profound feeling of fellowship. Catherine Albanese describes the sense of community after the Revolutionary War as *communitas*, or common identity. In such moments, “usual social boundaries and divisions were momentarily eased and suspended” (Howard-Pitney 152). Howard-Pitney describes the atmosphere in the aftermath of the March on Washington in 1965 as reminiscent of that communal sense, and I would argue *communitas* existed in some way in November of 2008. But the election of an African-American to the highest office was not an accomplishment. The purpose of these posts is to follow or lead the constituency to make the changes that can be made by government. Even when we have exhausted the changes that can be made by government, hegemony persists. While laws reflect the values of a given group, cultural norms are just as and often more powerful. Consider for a moment that no federal law determines the national language, yet the U.S. is largely monolingual. Empathy is not able to be legislated, yet that is what will lead to a truth-building apparatus that pulls the hegemonic impact away from truth. How do we craft such a sprawling, diverse society into one that has more empathy?

Because of the ambivalence Americans have regarding their national community, the biggest but least effective changes take place there (Bellah 253). Personal experience with someone of a different background is “the surest way to dispel stereotypes about minority groups” (Deggans 78). Stereotyping is only part of the problem. The most difficult obstacle to overcome is that mainstream Americans fail to include minority groups in their imagined community. Learning to identify people who are viewed fundamentally as others as part of one’s own community is a formidable challenge, especially on a large scale. This type of wholesale transformation can only be achieved

through “personal transformation among large numbers,” and this change must involve consciousness and actions that are supported and reinforced by the communities of memory³ to which the individuals belong (Bellah 286). These requirements are especially difficult for Americans to meet because of the emphasis in our national mythology on individualism. The groups Americans form based on interests and recreation, which are elective and which can require significant time and energy, are too exclusive and ephemeral to influence public affairs (Bellah 292). What is the responsibility of our semi-chosen communities like our schools and churches? As of now, only Hartford, Connecticut is experimenting with *voluntary* two-way integration of its inner-city and suburban schools through the Sheff Movement. This program is designed to recruit white, suburban students to attend inner-city (mostly non-white) schools and for the surrounding suburban districts to give slots to inner-city youth. So far they have made progress toward closing the achievement gap, and though the benefits of integrated schooling for the long-term are alluded to, we are left to assume that improved overall test scores are not coming at the expense of mutual respect, understanding, and support that these students can develop while together.

Public schools of choice can play a critical role in integrating students from varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. As a school of choice, Foxborough Regional Charter School has a diverse population in a relatively small venue: of the 1,323 students enrolled in K-12, twenty-one different languages other than English are spoken in the homes of our students. In a high school that was mostly white and middle class, students

³ Communities of memory are defined as “group of people who are socially interdependent upon each other... and who share certain practices.... Such a community... almost always has a history, and so it is defined in part by its past and its memory of its past” (Bellah 333).

who identify with minority groups now make up more than half of the 9-12 student body. In the student survey, as discussed in Chapter 2, ninety-four percent strongly or somewhat agreed that “adults at school expect me to do my best work.” This overwhelming percentage suggests that regardless of a student’s cultural or ethnic background, they feel that the adults at school hold high expectations for them. After my mild surprise dissipated, I thought about the factors that help make this support real. One of the factors that contributes to this sensibility is the requirement that all faculty meet with students outside of their academic course for the purpose of guidance or extra curricular clubs. This requirement is built into the school day, and while it can be seen as a duty as impersonal as lunch duty or proctoring a study hall, the fact is that this time, even when it is treated perfunctorily helps teachers to become acquainted with the student outside of their typical academic setting. Often this time will be a student-run club, where power dynamics are less one-sided. Knowing the student outside of the classroom provides opportunities to build rapport with students that is critical in determining how responsive students will be to assignments and material, how willing they’ll be to take academic risks, and how well students can advocate for themselves. Another factor that helps teachers support individual students is the relatively low student load we enjoy in the high school. While a typical middle school teacher will see roughly 110 students for academic courses, a teacher who teaches exclusively high school students will never see more than 100. This disparity is partly due to the attrition our school experiences as students seek different opportunities or convenience by attending their local high school, and it is partly due to a school-wide move toward team teaching. Considering the time high school teachers are able to spend learning about their students, it is little wonder that

the comments I overheard that initially prompted my interest in pursuing this topic came from middle school classrooms, while their high school counterparts feel supported by the staff.

Feeling that teachers expect your best work is important, but it does not translate to identifying oneself as a contributing member of the community. Only seventy-three percent of students surveyed indicated that they felt that they “have the ability to make a difference in [their] community.” The significant drop-off may indicate that the concept of “community” was not clearly defined in the survey, or it may indicate the nebulous role of the student, especially in a school that has recently implemented a rigid “character education” policy. Mary Louise Pratt discusses the various needs of students in terms of safe houses and contact zones in her article “The Art of the Contact Zone.” She discusses the importance of risk for everyone, even and especially the teacher, but the excitement and the rigor in a class like that also means “no one is safe” (39). The work of exploring all new cultures is enough to create a sense of *communitas*, even if the students are not afforded the ability to construct their own school culture.

Integration is not enough to promote a reformed imagined community. Mary Louise Pratt discusses contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (33). While most classrooms (even still) seek to eliminate “unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, [and] critique,” these are the rhetorics that force students of all backgrounds to examine themselves and their neighbors equally (Pratt 38). The work in a classroom like this can promote a new, more healthful and helpful imagined community. An understanding built from experience can ward against the divisive snarls

promoted by the polarized press. Yes, teachers must “work in the knowledge that whatever one said was going to be systematically received in radical heterogeneous ways” (Pratt 40). But through this work, schools are in a unique position to help students integrate others into their imagined (formerly homogenous) community by having to work and struggle together.

Epilogue

While I point to solutions to the huge problem of racial inequality in the U.S., I know that a whole-sale fix involves innumerable changes within individuals and communities of all sizes. This thesis is another project that looks again at inequality and the factors that contribute to it. Through this project, I've tried to bring a perspective that results from my particular situation, which is at a kind of intersection of perspectives—my students on the one hand, my father and my own relationship with law enforcement on the other. Although this thesis explores many facets of the impacts of current public sphere rhetorics on a face-to-face community, some areas require further study. Questions regarding the power of audience, the role of fiction and entertainment, and the policies that would better prepare law enforcement officers clamor for further exploration.

One area of personal interest to me is the impact of the audience in terms of driving the content of the public sphere. Different theories already exist about an audience as passive hearers or as a more active force that speakers cater to. Certainly a blend exists, but if it remains unlikely that intellectuals will determine which truths are assembled in media outlets, then the consumer must drive that truth-production. Currently, as discussed in Chapter 2, the market craves divisive coverage, but if the audience were able to demand coverage that made a productive conversation possible, then the public sphere and public life would look quite different. What mechanisms are needed to empower news consumers? What implements already exist that inhibit the audiences' abilities to determine more productive coverage of content? To tackle this topic would also involve exploring the inner-workings of different media outlets,

including the personalities in the newsrooms, the way they use data mining, and the current techniques they use to solicit audience in-put. While I did not explore these issues, I believe that more thorough attention given to the impact an audience can have on its news outlet may yield a more realistic path toward racial equality in the media and in American society.

Another question that became important to me through the course of this project was regarding the impact of fiction on the construction of imagined communities. Recently, a handful of major films have been what I call “progress narratives” about the American black experience. Films like *The Help* and *The Butler* communicate a story that implies that the work of racial equality is finished. These films, like the cases I focused on, are markers of progress and subtle obstacles to further progress toward racial equality in the U.S.

On the other hand, we are experiencing very gradual diversification of cable entertainment. Shows like Fox’s *Empire* and ABC’s *Scandal* feature powerful black characters, who are more dynamic than the black characters found in many sitcoms and dramas. While they still engage some racial stereotypes, these characters are not just the stereotype. Eric Deggans has done extensive work on how blacks are portrayed in the media and in TV, but has not explored whether shows like these expand our imagined community. If our imagined community can become more heterogeneous through our entertainment, it seems like that would be a more expedient, more likely path toward a healthier imagined community. Imagined communities are particularly important because, to a large degree, they dictate our interaction with those we come into contact with every day.

What adjustments are possible in our physical communities? Especially in the area of police work, what policies and training practices can be implemented to mitigate the divisive impact of homogenous imagined communities? Some steps are already being taken in police forces throughout the U.S., but is diversity among officers a stand-in for training on implicit biases? To grapple with these questions would require an in-depth look at the histories of different kinds of police departments throughout the U.S., and consistent evaluation of how various policies like body cameras, stop and frisk, and personnel decisions, impact the way officers deal with minority civilians. Much research has been done on the impact of profiling policies like stop and frisk, but research into the impacts of body cameras and the results of different training and hiring policies would be expensive, and would (I imagine) be difficult to coordinate without interrupting the daily operations of a police department. Yet these are the most immediate and critical questions that can reduce the frequency of tragedies like the deaths of Michael Brown, Jonathan Ferrell, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, and others who have lost lives at the hands or in the custody of police officers. The use of fatal force is a tragedy for the officers involved, too, so research into these questions is urgent for all parties involved.

This thesis is a jumping-off point for my own examination of these issues, but in the ever-growing collection of literature on the topic of racial justice, it does not deal with necessarily new insights, but I've tried to in theories that are not always a part of this particular conversation. I've also tried to compare the rhetorics of perspectives that are typically contrasted because the voice a group chooses, the constituency behind the voice, and the strategies employed by a speaker or a group can work against the overall

objective of that group. I have come to understand a great deal through this project, and I have gained an appreciation for areas of study that I and others can pursue in the future.

Appendix: Student Survey

Bridgewater State University
Public Sphere and the Community
ENGL 502 (A Master's Thesis)
Student Survey: Face to Face and Public Communities

This non-scientific survey is designed to support a research project for the English Department at Bridgewater State University. This survey is not compulsory and you can stop at any time without reason or cause. You may skip over any statement or question that you feel uncomfortable responding to. The results of this survey may be shared with other adults at Bridgewater State and Foxborough Regional Charter School, but no one outside of the researcher, Lauren Hanson Ells, will be privy to the individual survey results.

Circle the number that best addresses the question provided in the table below
(Circle only one response per question)

Question	Very Familiar	Somewhat familiar	Aware but unfamiliar	Unfamiliar
1. How familiar are you with the cases involving police using deadly force and young black men and teens?	4	3	2	1
2. How familiar are you with the various levels of government involved with such cases?	4	3	2	1
3. How familiar are you with verdicts of these cases?	4	3	2	1
4. How familiar are you with the biases of different cable news channels?	4	3	2	1

Statement	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5. The reporting of these cases is important.	4	3	2	1
6. The verdicts of these cases have impacted my perception of my community.	4	3	2	1
7. These cases matter to me personally	4	3	2	1
8. People who are in positions of authority in my community share my view on these cases.	4	3	2	1

Statement	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9. My teachers share my interests or have my interest in mind.	4	3	2	1
10. Adults at school expect me to do my best.	4	3	2	1
11. I have the ability to make a difference in my community.	4	3	2	1
12. Racial discrimination will be eliminated within my life time.	4	3	2	1

Free response:

13. What is the source you turn to for most of your information on current events (it may be conventional or unconventional)?

14. Please explain your response to statement number 5 ("The reporting of these cases is important."):

15. Please explain your response to statement number 6 ("The verdicts of these cases have impacted my perception of my community."):

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